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Afghanistan: Ethnic Diversity and Dissidence

A Research Paper

GC 80-10025
March 1980

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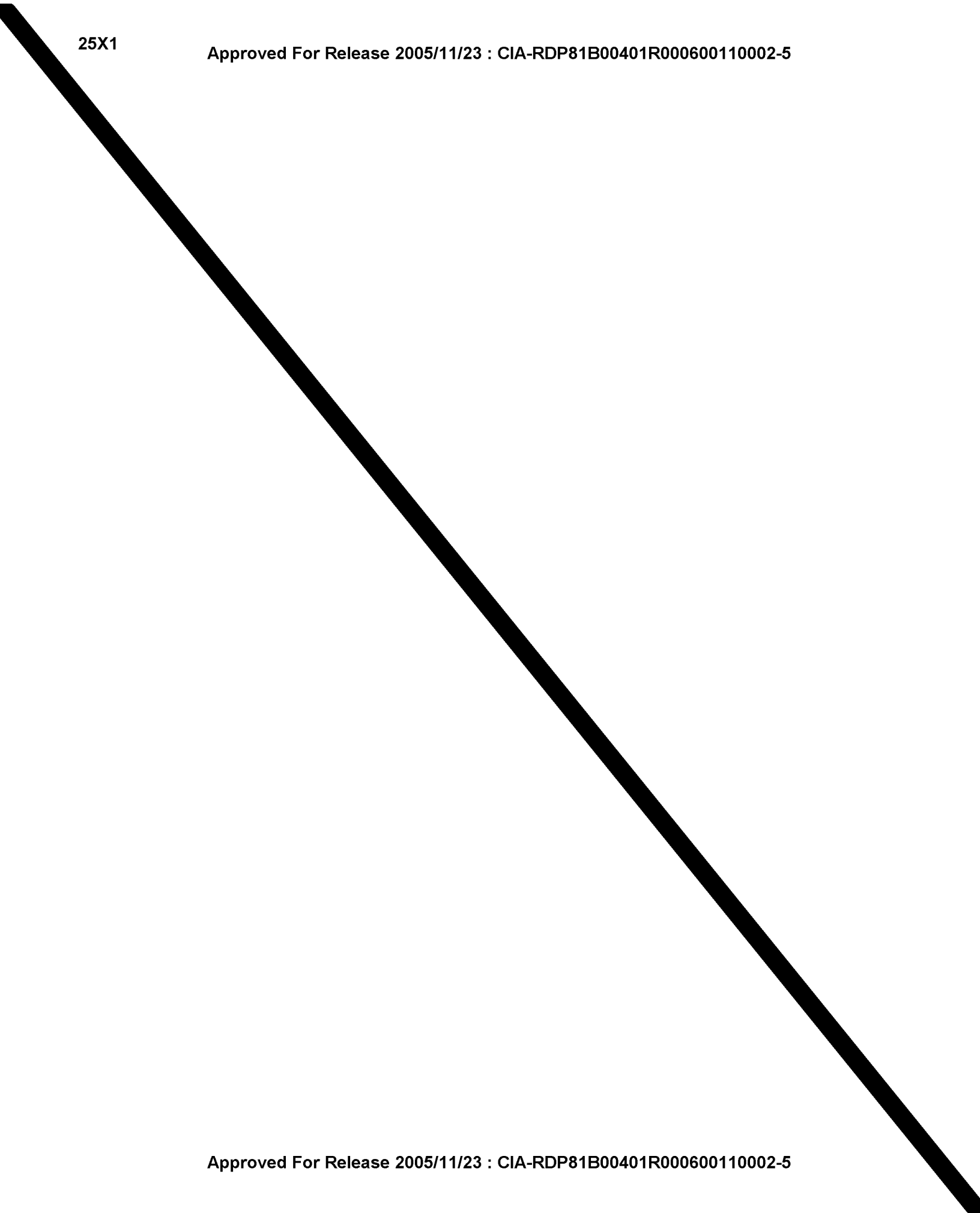

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A Research Paper

*Research for this report was completed on 1 May 1979.**

* *This paper was originally published in June 1979. Because of the Soviet invasion on 27 December and heightened interest in Afghanistan, this report is being reprinted. It reflects new developments but does not change the basic judgments presented.* (U)

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This paper was coordinated with the Office of Political Analysis. (U)

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Afghanistan: Ethnic Diversity and Dissidence

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Summary

The creation of a sense of national unity among the diverse peoples of Afghanistan has long been a challenging problem to its rulers. Afghanistan is a tribal society, composed of some 20 ethnic groups of widely varying backgrounds and cultures. About the only cohesive elements among these groups are their observance of Islamic law, martial tradition, and a distrust of government.

Pashtuns make up about one-half of Afghanistan's population. They are not only the largest ethnic group but also have traditionally wielded the greatest political power. This historic Pashtun preeminence is in turn a divisive issue between them and most of the other major Afghan ethnic groups. Other deep-seated animosities exist among the tribal groups, including the intratribal split between Sunni and Shia Islamic sects. These factors have worked together to thwart creation of a unified front or strategy against central authority.

The present tribal insurgency began in 1978 with the installation of the pro-Soviet Taraki regime. Afghanistan's devoutly Muslim and fiercely independent tribal population believed that the new government was Communist, atheist, and pro-Soviet. Reform measures brashly introduced by the government bolstered this belief and were viewed as attempts to displace the traditional social structure based on Islam and allegiance to family, clan, and tribe. The recent visible presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan has fulfilled the worst fears of the population and has added additional fuel to the fires of insurgency.

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U. S. S. R.
China
India
Iran
Pakistan
Iran
Dushanbe
Amu Darya
Mary
Kelif
Termez
Nizhniy Pyandzh
Shirkhan
Qonduz
Qonduz
Taloqan
Khanabad
Takhar
Badakhshan
Faryab
Balkh
Aybak
Baghlan
Pol-e Khomri
Samangan
Jowzjan
Meymaneh
Dowshi
Parvan
Kohsrha
Charikar
Bagram
Bamian
Kabul
Kabul
Nangarhar
Jalalabad
Lowgar
Vardak
Ghazni
Ghowr
Herat
Badghisat
Qaleh-ye Now
Chaghcharan
Oruzgan
Farah
Shindand
Farah Rud
Fareh
Delaram
Tarin Kowt
Dehi
Zabol
Qandahar
Spin Buldak
Chaman
Nimruz
Helmand
Zaranj
Hamun-e Saberi
Darvacheh-ye Sistan
Zahedan
Dalbandin
Quetta
Fort Sandeman
Zhob
Khowst
Thal
Bannu
Parachinar
Peshawar
Landi Kotal
Dargai
Rawalpindi
Islamabad
Gilgit
Chitral
Khorog
Feyzabad
Sarhadd
Kushka
Towraghondi
Herat
Ghowr
Oruzgan
Ghazni
Zabol
Qandahar
Helmand
Nimruz
Farah
Badghisat
Faryab
Jowzjan
Samangan
Balkh
Baghlan
Parvan
Kohsrha
Bamian
Vardak
Lowgar
Nangarhar
Badakhshan
Takhar
Qonduz
Afghanistan
International boundary
Province boundary
National capital
Province capital
Railroad
Road
Track or trail
0 Kilometers 100
Unclassified
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Afghanistan: Ethnic Diversity and Dissidence

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late December 1979 climaxed nearly two years of gradually increased Soviet support and presence in the country. The installation of a Marxist, pro-Soviet regime following the April 1978 revolution and the introduction of unpopular social policies ignited a tribal-based insurgency that has continued and intensified. A better understanding of the underlying causes of this insurgency is provided through an examination of the ethnic background and culture of the Afghan peoples and their attitudes toward each other and toward central government control generally.

Setting

Afghanistan, slightly larger than the state of Texas, is the meeting place of diverse physical and cultural worlds. Physically, Afghanistan is an extension of the high land mass known as the Iranian Plateau; nearly two-thirds of the country consists of mountains.

In central and eastern Afghanistan the mountains—dominated by the Hindu Kush—present a formidable physical barrier and provide a favorable milieu for tribal separatism. To the north, west, and southwest, however, Afghanistan merges with the high plains and plateaus of central and south Asia. Across this region of transit has come a succession of peoples—Aryans, Medes, Persians, Greeks, Turks, and Mongols—bent on trade and conquest; others have climbed the passes and crossed the plateaus bearing the message of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Islam. It is from this mixture of peoples and cultures that the modern state of Afghanistan has been emerging since the 18th century.

Each of the approximately 20 ethnic groups in Afghanistan has certain distinctive physical characteristics, differing social institutions, and varying sets of values.[1] The origins and kinships among the many groups are a matter of scholarly controversy because of the lack of indigenous written records, fragmentary historic sources, and scanty archaeological, anthropometric, and serological evidence.

[1] For detailed discussion of selected ethnic groups, see pp. 5 and 6.

By size, the major groups include the Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara; other important groups include the Chahar Aimak, Turkmen, Nuristani, Baluchi, and Brahui.[2] Of the total estimated population of 15 million, about 50 percent are Pashtun and nearly 30 percent are Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara. Total population estimates, however, are confused by the *kuchis*, or Afghan nomads, who number from 2 to 4 million and are members of several ethnic groups. Many of the tribal people have ethnic ties with peoples inhabiting adjacent areas of the USSR, Iran, and Pakistan.

Despite considerable diversity, there are common ties of language and religion that provide some element of cohesiveness among the groups. The common language is Dari, the Afghan form of Persian (Farsi), which is used by all groups but is not the first language of any group. Nearly all of the ethnic groups are Muslim and about 80 percent are of the Sunni sect, while the remainder are adherents of the Shia sect. Although the two sects are contentious, the division has not resulted in the bloody confrontations that have occurred in other Muslim lands.

Ethnic Attitudes and Rivalries

Tribes and tribalism remain important in Afghanistan, particularly among the Pashtun, whose Durrani tribal families have ruled the country since its unification by one of them in the 18th century. The Pashtun are strong in number; some of their tribes, such as the Durrani, Ghilzai, and Yuzufazai, individually have at least a million members. The degree of tribal loyalty, however, varies considerably among the Pashtun, and tribal feuds and rivalries at times have been divisive forces in the country. The Durrani, though divided into numerous subtribes or clans and widely scattered, usually have rallied to a common cause when the need arose.

[2] There is no standard or agreed spelling of the names of the ethnic groups in Afghanistan. In the absence of an official census list, the names used here are those that appear most consistently in authoritative sources. For example, alternate names for Pashtun include Pushtun (name used in Pakistan) and Pathan (the Indian corruption of Pashtun); Uzbeg or Uzbak for Uzbek; Turkoman for Turkmen; and Chahar Aimak, simply Aimak.

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